Submission No 21

INQUIRY INTO INQUIRY INTO PFAS CONTAMINATION IN WATERWAYS AND DRINKING WATER SUPPLIES THROUGHOUT NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: MidCoast Council

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MIDCOAST council

MIDCOAST COUNCIL SUBMISSION TO THE NEW SOUTH WALES PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO PFAS CONTAMINATION IN WATERWAYS AND DRINKING WATER SUPPLIES THROUGHOUT NEW SOUTH WALES

November 2024

Introduction

MidCoast Council is located on the mid-north coast of New South Wales. The Council provides services to a diverse region of 195 towns, villages and localities covering an area of 10,000 square kilometres, and supporting a population of over 90,000 residents. Around 90% of this population is serviced by reticulated water and sewage services provided by Council. To provide this service to the community, Council operates 14 Sewage Treatment Plants and 6 Water Treatment Plants.

MidCoast Council welcomes this New South Wales Parliamentary inquiry into PFAS contamination to waterways and drinking water supplies. The issue of emerging contaminants has wide-ranging potential impacts on Councils ability to provide safe and reliable reticulated water services to the community. This is in addition to the multitude of challenges already faced by regional water utilities such as water security and adapting to a changing climate.

Council acknowledges PFAS compounds may pose significant issues in environmental and agricultural settings. However, in developing the following response, Council has focused on the primary role it plays as a regional water utility.

Terms of reference of the inquiry

MidCoast Council welcomes and supports the full terms of reference of the inquiry. However, Council will be addressing the following inquiry terms that have closest alignment with the delivery of reticulated water services to the community:

a) The adequacy and extent of monitoring and data collection on PFAS levels in waterways and drinking water sources
b) The adequacy of the reporting and disclosure requirements to the public of monitoring and findings on PFAS contamination of water
c) The structure, capacity, capability and resourcing of New South Wales Government agencies and water utilities to detect, monitor, report on, respond to and mitigate against PFAS contamination of water supplies, including the adequacy of infrastructure and resources

MidCoast Councils' role in providing reticulated water services

MidCoast Council acts as system owner and operator in the delivery of reticulated drinking water to our customers. Council obligations include managing over 110,000 assets across water treatment and distribution schemes, and planning for the future to accommodate increasing population and changes to climate systems. Council also discharges responsibilities to ensure our systems are operated in strict accordance with New South Wales legislated requirements.

MidCoast Council's response to the inquiry terms of reference

a) The adequacy and extent of monitoring and data collection on PFAS levels in waterways and drinking water sources

Access to analytical services

The specialist nature of PFAS laboratory analysis sees limited services available outside major metropolitan centres. In addition, these services are typically costly, and the collection of samples requires carefully considered procedures to prevent potential contamination of samples.

Council undertook initial PFAS sampling efforts in 2018 in response to changes in the Australian Drinking Water Guidelines (ADWG). This analysis included a limit of reporting of 0.01 ug/L which was the most sensitive test available to Council at the time. In 2024 Council completed an extensive round of sampling covering all drinking schemes in the MidCoast Local Government Area. New South Wales Health provided financial and logistical support for this work. This analysis included a practical limit of quantitation of 0.001 ug/L. Council has also undertaken limited PFAS testing across wastewater treatment schemes with sometimes confounding results between laboratory providers.

Recommendation 1: New South Wales Health be resourced to provide ongoing technical, logistical and financial support to regional water utilities to facilitate PFAS analysis in drinking water.

PFAS analysis and regulatory frameworks

The provision of drinking water to consumers relies on Council to maintain and operate specialist treatment and distribution infrastructure, and New South Wales agencies to prescribe performance objectives such as human health and aesthetic water quality targets. This division of responsibility promotes the safety and reliability of these schemes.

Council employs a Drinking Water Quality Management System (DWQMS) in managing drinking water supplies. The DWQMS provides a proactive risk-based approach to managing water schemes and is developed, implemented and reviewed with the constructive support of New South Wales Health.

The monitoring of water quality across raw and treated drinking water schemes is detailed in Council's DWQMS, which is developed in accordance with all regulatory requirements. The current approach is risk-based to ensure community investment is proportional to risk.

Recommendation 2: The potential risks posed by PFAS pollution be considered on a case-by-case basis across each water source. Should risks be identified, regulatory requirements be updated to incorporate suitable PFAS monitoring. Should a water source be assessed as being safe and below established thresholds, PFAS monitoring requirements not be applied or greatly reduced to avoid unnecessary regulatory and financial burden to water utilities.

b) The adequacy of the reporting and disclosure requirements to the public of monitoring and findings on PFAS contamination of water

PFAS reporting and disclosure and regulatory requirements

Council's DWQMS is developed in accordance with the requirements of the ADWG. This includes the identification of the analytes to be tested to ensure the safety and compliance of treated drinking water. Element 8 of the Framework for Management of Drinking Water Quality (ADWG)

also advises water utilities should regularly communicate monitoring results and water quality issues. Further, the Public Health Regulation 2022 prescribes water management systems include 'processes for engaging and raising awareness in the local community about the quality of the drinking water and informing the community at the time of a drinking water supply system incident'.

Council currently exercises reporting and disclosure of drinking water quality and system performance via data published to our corporate website. Further information is provided to interested parties via enquiries managed in Council's customer request system that provides opportunity for in-person, telephone and online submissions.

Recommendation 3: PFAS analysis be incorporated into existing drinking water quality management frameworks and legislation. Where justified by risk-based assessment processes, the reporting and disclosure of PFAS testing be results be prescribed in drinking water quality management frameworks and legislation.

c) The structure, capacity, capability and resourcing of New South Wales Government agencies and water utilities to detect, monitor, report on, respond to and mitigate against PFAS contamination of water supplies, including the adequacy of infrastructure and resources

Detect, monitor and report on PFAS

As with many emerging potential water contaminants, the management of PFAS compounds has required building specialist capacity across government agencies, industry bodies and service providers. This requirement is further complicated in many regional areas were establishing locally based resources is already challenging. Due to the high number of evolving water management issues facing the sector, PFAS management is also required to compete with other developing challenges such as a changing climate.

Efforts to detect, monitor and report on PFAS can be greatly impacted by capacity, capability and resourcing. However, as evident by Council's recent experience with New South Wales Health, agencies do possess resilience and the capability to respond and build capacity in a timely manner. The concern may be one of resourcing more than capacity and capability. This stems from the observation that while capacity and capability exist, it is fundamentally the same resources being shared across yet another issue. There does appear opportunity that addressing an issue such as PFAS monitoring and reporting, may be undertaken to the detriment of another water quality management action of equal risk and importance.

Recommendation 4: The regulatory burden of detecting, monitoring and reporting emerging contaminants such as PFAS be recognised and additional resources but assigned to lead New South Wales agencies such as New South Wales Health.

Respond to and mitigate against PFAS contamination of water supplies

The nature of PFAS compounds limits the type of water treatment technology capable of being deployed to mitigate contaminated raw water supplies. The inherent reliability required for drinking

water treatment requires novel treatment solutions to undergo extensive validation prior to regulatory approval and implementation.

Of the current known treatment options that may address PFAS contaminated raw water, reverse osmosis offers a technique that is well understood and widely employed by the industry. As an exercise, Council completed high-level cost estimates of the capital and operational expenditure required to add reverse osmosis to the largest water treatment plant in the MidCoast region. The work revealed augmentation of the existing process to add reverse osmosis would require a community capital investment of more than $22M. In addition, operational costs would increase by approximately $5M annually. This scheme only services around 35,000 homes and businesses. Council currently operates another five schemes that would require similar significant upgrade should PFAS be identified in critical raw water source.

Recommendation 5: PFAS thresholds defining safe water be developed based on actual risk and not be unnecessarily conservative. This is to ensure safe raw water supplies are not misrepresented as unsafe, and additional treatment processes and associated costs are not imposed unless absolutely required.

Recommendation 6: The financial sustainability of many regional water utilities be recognised and alternate funding options be developed should additional PFAS treatment requirements be identified.

Conclusion

MidCoast Council commends the New south Wales Parliament in undertaking the Inquiry into PFAS contamination in waterways and drinking water supplies throughout New South Wales. Council considers that the issue is best addressed through the adequate resourcing of lead agencies such as New South Wales Health to provide continued specialist support to regional water utilities in managing the impacts from PFAS. In addition, Council promotes that any future guidelines and legislative changes be based on actual risk posed by PFAS contamination for each particular water sources or geographical area. Lastly, Council would like to highlight the existing financial sustainability challenges faced by many regional water authorities and suggest alternate funding options be considered should PFAS mitigation for drinking water be required.

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